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J. Edgar's WLM Caper

Are you now or have you ever been a member of the women's movement?

If so, you may find yourself in the 1,377 pages of memos, reports, teletypes, tape transcripts, press clippings and leaflets released thus far from the material gathered between 1969 and 1973 in the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation under the subject heading "Women's Liberation Movement (WLM)."

Wherever we were, they were—or tried to be: at street actions where we marched 40,000 strong, and at consciousness-raising groups of six women; at a building takeover at Harvard and a rally for Black Panther women at a New Haven prison. They followed us to the Statue of Liberty, to women's studies courses, to a farm retreat in Pennsylvania, to protests of the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City and to college campuses from Oregon to Vermont.

For all its 1,377 pages, the file is like a thickly plotted mystery play in which the detectives do their acting in the wings out of audience view.

At center stage is J. Edgar Hoover's vacuum cleaner sucking up evidence on the apparent assumption that it will amount to dirt. Early on, several field offices advised Hoover that they wished to put the matter into a "closed status." The director overruled them: "The bureau does not concur with your recommendation that a report on WLM activity within your division is not warranted at this time. . . . It is absolutely essential that we conduct sufficient investigation to clearly establish subversive ramifications of the WLM and to determine the potential for violence presented by the various groups connected with this movement as well as any possible threat they may represent to the internal security of the United States."

Among the most incriminating "facts" amassed against women were reports that we were not all heterosexual, nor were we all ladylike and attractive: "The women, in general, appeared to be hippies, lesbians or from other far-out groups. Most of them were very colorfully dressed, but the majority [sic] wore faded blue jeans. Most seemed to be making a real attempt to be unattractive. . . . One of the interesting aspects of the delegates' dress was the extreme fuzzy appearance of their hair. . . . Someone said this . . . was gotten by braiding their hair in tiny braids and leaving it that way while it was wet until it dried. . . . From the looks of their hair they apparently really didn't bother to try and comb it out afterwards."

The FBI tabulated us by marital status, looks, age, class, race and sexual preference. But they could never make sense of us. The Panther women showed up with the housewives. Revolutionary firebrands appeared to be comfortably middle class. High-school hippies marched beside established professional women. We defied typecasting.

All this raises the question: Why was the FBI watching the Women's Movement? (I use the past tense with no confidence whatsoever.)

1. *Fear of social change and unrest.* In 1970, the special agents in San Francisco sent Hoover a trenchant analysis of the WLM: "This movement reflects the same restlessness and dissatisfaction [that have] motivated minority, student and a variety of other groups to engage in agitation."

Remember that the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s was marked by expressions of intense, broad-based discontent. Many of us were protesting the Vietnam war, attacking U.S. domestic policies and leaders, taking to the streets by the hundreds of thousands.

2. *Fear of affiliation with "dangerous" or "subversive" groups.* Taking advantage of this atmosphere of social dissidence (and what the FBI presumed to be the naiveté of most women), several already-fingered "subversive" groups supposedly saw the women's movement as a means to attract converts and advance their revolutionary aims.

3. *Fear of some deep erosion of the American way of life.* In Hoover's puritanical terms, an attack on woman's role was an attack on the American way of life.

Free abortion on demand and health collectives smacked of socialism. To FBI ears, communes and community-controlled child care had an unmistakable Communist ring to them. Self-defense classes, lesbian rights, understanding female sexual pleasure, criticism of the nuclear family and attacks on male chauvinism—all introduced sour ingredients into American apple pie, not to mention the idea that Mom might stop making it.

To the FBI, the solidarity of feminists, socialists, peace and Third World groups, prisoners and poor people probably added up to a conspiracy of saboteurs and heretics. The WLM files clatter with Rube Goldberg inventions that the bureau could activate to graft feminism onto the large Communist menace.

"She made a number of references to the Russian Revolution in discussing WLM" was enough to justify surveillance. Meeting with Toronto women or listening to American women describe a trip to North Vietnam or China deserved an entry under "Contact with Foreign Women's Groups." Sometimes an entire group was characterized by the presence of one "person who in the past has been identified as a 'subversive.'"

By the end of these interminable, repetitive appendices, the distinctions between the WLM group and the "designated" revolutionary group were thoroughly blurred.

The FBI never understood the feminist tenet that "the personal is political." Consciousness raising as a radicalizing process and an impetus for activism was lost on them.

So what did the bureau come up with for all its effort?

A notice taken from the board at the New York City Women's Liberation Center recommended that women use Paul Newman's credit-card number when dialing long distance, a potentially illegal act. But that isn't supported by testimony that anyone actually used the number. A small New Orleans group hatched a plan to get women hired as telephone line workers so they could learn wiretapping skills, but the group disbanded before anyone could make a move toward Southern Bell. Those two "plots" are the only serious illegal strategies—both stillborn—uncovered by the FBI in four years of trying. Reading the FBI's view of feminism is like learning about war and peace from a tour guide at the Pentagon: The facts are familiar, but the conclusions make no sense at all.

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